

May 5th, 2020

Dear Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

My name is Kristen Burgess, and I am the mother of a sexual abuse survivor. I am the wife of a sexual abuse victim-offender. My family has been devastated by sexual trauma and the legacy of childhood abuse.

I am opposed to House Bill 5679.

In my need to process what happened in my family and to grasp at the answer to that terrible question, “why us,” I began to research extensively. My research led me to the shocking and crushing realization that what we as a society are doing to “prevent” child and teen sexual abuse is not working. **The registry doesn’t protect children, youth, and families any better than it protected our daughter.** Long, punitive prison sentences don’t make families safer.

They didn’t make my daughter safer.

Statistically, these perpetual punishment measures just don’t work. 98% of newly reported incidents of child sexual abuse annually involve a “new” perpetrator. That’s shocking to me.

We’re not doing anything to try and stop child sexual abuse. We talk to children about body safety. That’s about it.

There’s a tiny bit of focus on children – and no focus on adults. Except, of course, to incarcerate. To put on a public registry that further destroys already broken lives and further forecloses on healing for families. Then we pat ourselves on the back and pretend we’ve done something to “stop” child sexual abuse. **Except it’s not stopping anything.** It’s all after the abuse already occurred.

There’s nothing – no billboards, no PSA’s, *nothing to help men understand how to handle their childhood abuse* – to help stop trauma cycles in their tracks.

Instead of stopping child sexual abuse before it stops by focusing on helping men heal from childhood trauma and building communities that can handle stress and trauma in healthy ways, **instead we’re in the middle of a global pandemic debating how to perpetually punish families.**

Our family *asked to heal*. My daughter decided she didn’t want to throw her dad away. And, thank God, we had the Traverse Bay Area Children’s Advocacy Center, which supported my daughter, myself, and our other children. The CAC helped us understand that it’s okay to hate what someone did – and still love them. The CAC helped us understand that victims don’t always need or want the same thing and that some victims *want restorative justice*. The CAC supported us in advocating for our family with our local prosecuting attorney.

A sex offender psychologist evaluated my husband while the CAC evaluated me and each of our children. Our children’s Guardian Ad-Litem spent extensive time with our family, getting to know us, our treatment team, and our needs. A multi-disciplinary team came alongside our family and supported us as we started to heal.

Unfortunately, the prosecutor valued her agenda and her reputation more than my daughter’s healing. Instead of healing, our family is facing a 12-30 year prison sentence. Instead of the recommended plea

bargain and community supervision that would have allowed my husband to live with his mom and pay us child support, we've paid over \$50,000 fighting for our family. I calculated the costs to our family over the years of incarceration and life on the registry...

...my children's inheritance is being eaten by the very system that is supposed to protect them.

And the system that was supposed to protect my daughter has become a second abuser.

People are supposed to "pay their debt to society" and move forward with life, able to become productive citizens and contribute to their family and community. The registry prevents that from happening. Regardless of what courts might say, everyone knows the registry is punitive and ruins lives by stopping people from gaining employment or building meaningful community connections.

Unless we have a miraculous intervention, my husband will leave prison as a senior citizen. Getting employment with the registry hanging over his head will likely be impossible.

I, on the other hand, will still be raising minor children.

The MDOC spends \$40,000+ annually to incarcerate my husband. I'm raising our children on food stamps and prayers.

Judiciary Committee, I ask you, **where is the justice?**

We asked for healing, had a multi-disciplinary team ready to help us, established frameworks to follow, and a strong safety plan. Instead, our prosecutor forced my husband to plea guilty as charged – resulting in a harsh sentence, lifetime registry, and the economic devastation of our family... a robbed financial legacy for my children.

Judiciary Committee, again I ask you, **where is the justice?**

What my husband did was heinous and caused shockwaves of trauma for my daughter and my whole family. **But the exponential, collateral damage has been unfathomable. The unnecessary, exponential, collateral damage.**

The people who were supposed to protect us have not only ignored us, they have shamed and persecuted us. *And they have ignored evidence.*

This registry bill is being pushed through in bad faith. It feels sleazy and underhanded – after ignoring this matter for *years*, you're trying to push through a bill in the middle of a *global pandemic*?

I just cannot fathom how a culture that prides itself on #metoo can be so arrogant as to ignore the primary prevention of child sexual abuse. I cannot believe we're throwing money away on a registry scheme that destroys lives and has been shown not only to be ineffective but to *increase* the chances that someone may reoffend.

As the mother of a victim and as the wife of a victim who became an abuser, I am disgusted that generations are slipping through the cracks while lawmakers pat themselves on the back for passing ineffective legislation.

If you cared, you would listen to the evidence that you've already been given about what works and what does not with sex offender registries.

And if you cared about victims, you would *listen* to their voices rather than persecuting them when they challenge your narrative and threaten the “powers that be” in the system.

We need to spend money on victim services and primary prevention. We do not need to spend money on an ineffective registry that destroys lives and blocks chances for rehabilitation, healing, and second chances.

My family deserves a second chance, not a life sentence.

Sincerely,

Kristen S. Burgess

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